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# Osler Came to Boston

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Harvard University, engraving made from a water color by Richard Rummell (1848–1924).

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## Osler came to Boston

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Boston can lay claim to being the home of many notable figures in medicine but not that of William Osler (1849–1919). He was the preeminent English-speaking physician at the turn of the twentieth century but is not so widely recognized today among younger physicians in spite of the efforts of a small international society dedicated to his memory, the American Osler Society. Born in Canada, Osler taught successively at McGill University (1870–1884), the University of Pennsylvania (1884–1889), and the Johns Hopkins Medical School (1889–1905). He spent his final years as the Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford (1905–1919) and was knighted in 1911. Thus he lived mainly in four cities:

Montreal, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Oxford. Osler did postgraduate research for a year or so in London, where he reported the role of platelets in blood clotting. He often came to New York City, mostly to board ships for passage to Europe. He frequented Boston professionally and during his middle years visited there the family of his wife, Grace Linzee Revere Gross (“the Widow Gross,” as Osler sometimes called her), the great-granddaughter of Boston’s Paul Revere.

During the four decades between 1876 and 1913 Osler made at least nine trips to Boston to learn about advances in medical education, to share his clinical expertise, and to relate his humanistic views on medicine in talks before various groups.

### 1875: Boston medicine

In 1875 Osler was twenty-six years old and a young professor at the McGill Medical School. In August of that year he traveled down to Boston, as Harvey Cushing wrote, “to familiarize himself with its medical traditions” and to do some library research.<sup>1p142</sup> He had a letter of introduction



Sir William Osler at the bedside at Johns Hopkins Hospital, circa 1903-1904.  
Courtesy of the Osler Library of the History of Medicine, McGill University.



**William Osler and his wife, Grace Revere Osler, in Oxford, probably 1894.**

Courtesy of the Osler Library of the History of Medicine, McGill University.



**John Collins Warren, Henry Pickering Bowditch, and William Osler on Bowditch's front steps in Boston, 1909.**

Courtesy of the Osler Library of the History of Medicine, McGill University.

to the foremost physician in Boston, the venerated Henry Ingersoll Bowditch (1808–1892). Bowditch had studied under Pierre Louis in France and had translated Louis' monograph on typhoid. Young Osler spent a memorable evening with the elderly physician and upon leaving was given a bundle of Dr. Bowditch's reprints with this parting advice: to keep a reprint of everything he, Osler, should write.

### 1877: Harvard Medical School

Two years later, in April 1877, Osler stayed a week in Boston visiting Harvard Medical School, which was then located on North Grove Street near the Massachusetts General Hospital. The medical school had been undergoing major educational changes following the inauguration of Charles Eliot as president of Harvard in 1869. Eliot had been appalled at the poor quality of incoming Harvard medical students. Three-fourths of them had only a high school diploma. While the later clinical training was good in Boston's several hospitals, the preclinical instruction lasted only two years and consisted of five months of lectures repeated in the second year. Exams were given orally and were very cursory. Professors were paid by student fees, which invited popular courses over rigorous ones. But these conditions characterized most other U.S. medical schools.

Eliot introduced the following changes:

1. The university collected student fees
2. Instructors were placed on a regular salary
3. Admission standards were raised
4. The basic science curriculum was reformed, with teachers trained in European research methods

5. A three-year-long sequence of courses running nine months each year and involving written examinations was instituted.<sup>2p33</sup>

At the North Grove Street school, Osler was impressed with the physiology course taught by Henry Pickering Bowditch (1840–1911), whom he had previously met when visiting his uncle, the elderly Dr. Bowditch. The younger Bowditch had studied under Paul Broca and Jean Charcot and had spent time with Claude Bernard and the histologist Paul Ranvier. Osler admired the school's three student physiology labs, all well equipped with microscopes, microtomes, and kymographs. He judged the instruction offered there in chemistry and pathology equally superior. But perhaps above all, Osler envied the autopsy suite at the Massachusetts General Hospital. In an article written later that year he urged all American medical schools to follow "the good example of Harvard."<sup>3p274</sup> Osler's interest in medical education dated from the two Boston visits.

### 1883: Harvard Medical School centennial

During the fall of 1883, while still at McGill, Osler made his third trip to Boston to attend the centennial celebration of Harvard Medical School at its new location on Boylston Street. Oliver Wendell Holmes, a former dean and the emeritus professor of Anatomy, gave a long address, reviewing the medical school's history. The first classes in 1783 had been taught in the basement of Harvard Hall in Cambridge; in 1810 the medical school began its moves through a succession of locations in Boston. But for Osler, more important than the





On the Quad with Harvard Medical School faculty, April 30, 1913. From left to right: Drs. John L. Bremer, Theobald Smith, Walter B. Cannon, J. Collins Warren, Milton J. Rosenau, David Linn Edsall, Charles S. Minot, Sir William Osler, Harvey Cushing, William T. Councilman, Henry A. Christian, and S. Burt Wolbach. Courtesy of the Brigham and Women's Hospital Archives.

school's history was its new dean, who was Henry Pickering Bowditch. He had expanded the new curriculum to include laboratory courses in histology, bacteriology, and embryology.

### 1894: Harvard Alumni Association

In June of 1894, Osler, then in Baltimore for five years, came up to Boston to speak before the Harvard Medical Alumni Association. A few weeks before, the initial class at the Hopkins Medical School had just completed its first year of basic sciences. At the alumni meeting, Osler described Hopkins' various preclinical courses. He added that Hopkins differed from most other American medical schools in the controversial issue of admitting women to all classes.\*

\*Initially, Osler and William Henry Welch had not favored the intrusion of women students into their teaching programs, but both ultimately accepted them because of an endowment to the medical school of half a million dollars by a group of Baltimore ladies, who stipulated admission of women to all classes. The medical school was finally able to open in 1893 only because of their half-million-dollar bequest. Several years before, the Baltimore ladies had made overtures about coeducation to Harvard Medical School but had been rebuffed by the conservative medical faculty there.

Another professor at Hopkins, Dr. William T. Councilman, had been more inflexible than Osler and Welch because of a strongly held theological bias concerning women. How his objection was overcome is well told by both Cushing and Michael Bliss<sup>4pp199-201</sup> but bears repeating briefly here. The problem of Councilman's intransigence at the Hopkins Medical School disappeared when he was recruited back to his alma mater Harvard as professor of pathological anatomy. There he became a successful department chair and later an important figure in local medical politics. As Osler related to his Harvard Medical Alumni audience, "We took the money, and you took the man. We have co-education without Councilman, and you [have] Councilman without co-education." <sup>1p399</sup>

To the alumni audience Osler lamented that coeducation at Hopkins actually had been a failure because at the end of the first year one-third of the female students had dropped out for marriage.<sup>1p399</sup> The truth of the matter was that only three women had been admitted to the first class of eighteen students.<sup>1p388</sup> Later, another female student was lost because she became a Christian Scientist.<sup>1p399</sup> The next Hopkins medical class included eight women among the forty students admitted.

### 1901: Boston Medical Library

In 1901 Osler again took the train up from Baltimore—this time to speak at the dedication of a new building for the Boston Medical Library.<sup>1p544</sup> During his very first visit to Boston in 1875, he had spent time in the old library searching the medical literature on hemorrhagic smallpox and thus had great respect for the library's collection.<sup>5p133</sup> It was in this talk in 1901 that Osler declared, "To study the phenomena of disease without books is to sail an uncharted sea, while to study books without patients is not to go to sea at all." <sup>1p545</sup>

### 1904: The Ingersoll Lecture

In 1904 Osler was invited by President Eliot of Harvard to give the Sixth Ingersoll Lecture, an annual address on "The Immortality of Man." It was a formidable undertaking, since an earlier speaker had been William James, the famous pragmatic, agnostic philosopher. The lecture was delivered in Harvard's intimidating Memorial Hall. Osler's wife and her Boston family, the Reveres, attended.

Osler was reluctant to disclose publicly his innermost beliefs, particularly with his in-laws present. Years before, when asked about his own religion, he replied, "I'm of the religion



With the staff of the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, April 30, 1913, scarcely two months after the first patients had been received. Seated in the center row are Charles Sedgwick Minot, W. T. Councilman, H. A. Christian, Sir William Osler, John Collins Warren, Harvey Cushing, H. B. Howard, L. H. Burlingham W. B. Connor. Courtesy the Brigham and Women's Hospital Archives.

of all sensible people. And what is that? No sensible man discusses his religion.”<sup>6p478</sup> Osler sought to keep the subject of his lecture impersonal by entitling his talk “Science and Immortality.” He ventured no new insights, because, as he added, “everything possible had been said before . . . by the master minds of the race.”<sup>7p8</sup> To make his point, he quoted the Bible nine times and reviewed thirty-eight opinions from twenty-five authors. Conceding that medical science could contribute nothing to the subject, Osler, nevertheless, advised “the scientific student should be ready to acknowledge the value of a belief in a hereafter as an asset in human life. . . . [and to] gratefully accept the incalculable comfort of such a belief to those sorrowing for precious friends hid in death’s dateless night.”<sup>7pp73-75</sup> Osler donated his honorarium to the Boston Medical Library. Cushing reported that the talk was “not a particularly well-delivered address.” President Eliot found the lecture “a brilliant and charming essay” but disappointing.<sup>1pp639-40</sup> Nonetheless, the next month during the Harvard Commencement Ceremony Osler was awarded an honorary doctor of laws degree.

### 1909–1913: Massachusetts General Hospital, Yale University, and the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital

Osler’s last three visits to Boston occurred while he was living in Oxford. During the summer of 1910 he made an impromptu appearance on a medical ward at the Massachusetts General Hospital, which was fondly recalled years later in articles by the two young attending physicians—Joseph H. Pratt<sup>8p87</sup> and Reginald Fitz.<sup>9p615</sup>

A year earlier, in May 1909, Osler had been in America seeing old friends. In Boston he had attended a dinner, sitting “between the out and the in” presidents of Harvard—the retiring Charles W. Eliot and the incoming A. Lawrence Lowell. The next day Osler and Lowell discussed concerns and fears voiced by clinicians at the Massachusetts General Hospital and the Boston City Hospital about “a new large general hospital” to be called the Peter Bent Brigham.<sup>5p178</sup> What exactly the clinicians found controversial is now unclear. Osler declined an invitation to be a formal adviser for the new hospital.

In April of 1913 Osler again returned to the States for what proved to be his final visit. The First World War would soon intrude on his life. Yale University had invited him to give the Silliman Foundation Lectures, which he entitled *The Beginnings of Modern Medicine*—later published as *The Evolution of Modern Medicine*. He also delivered a short lay sermon to Yale undergraduates entitled, “A Way of Life.”<sup>5p349</sup>

During this last visit to America, Boston was included for a hastily scheduled ceremony at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital. Harvey Cushing, surgeon-in-chief, recalled the affair several years later as follows: “It happened that Sir William Osler was in this country on a visit and though we were in no condition to have a formal opening his presence forced the occasion, for we wished his baptism even though the hospital . . . was still in the stage of scaffolding and plaster.”<sup>10p54</sup> Osler gave a short talk, noting the three functions of a hospital: 1) the care of patients, 2) the instruction of students, and 3) the extension of knowledge. He added a further thought about hospitals—that many inspire the “feeling

that you are a part of a great organization.”<sup>10p57</sup>

### 1897–1906: Harvard Medical School

Independent of his visits, Osler also had an indirect effect on Harvard Medical School through his textbook of medicine. The first edition, published in 1892, was proclaimed “a literary as well as a scientific masterpiece.”<sup>11p37</sup> In 1897, the Reverend Frederick T. Gates, the philanthropic adviser to John D. Rockefeller, was urged by a medical student acquaintance to read the Osler text. Gates did so during one summer with the aid of a medical dictionary. He came away impressed that “medicine had—with . . . few exceptions . . . —no cures.”<sup>1p454</sup> Being aware of the impact on public health of bacteriological studies done by Koch and Pasteur, Gates advised Rockefeller to fund medical research in this country. As a result, the Rockefeller fortune was used to establish the Rockefeller Institute in New York City, the Rockefeller Foundation for Medical Research, and the Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene & Public Health.

Perhaps less well known is that Rockefeller also contributed one million dollars of the five million dollars needed to construct the Longwood Avenue buildings of Harvard Medical School.<sup>12p181</sup> Land for a new medical school complex had been purchased near the Fens of Boston’s Back Bay. The money donated by Rockefeller allowed construction to begin in 1903. These buildings were completed and dedicated in 1906, but Osler did not attend the ceremony, having just settled in at Oxford.

### 1891 and 1904: Harvard calling

Osler received two invitations to join the Harvard faculty. Henry Pickering Bowditch had become Osler’s close friend and had assumed that he could never be induced to leave his academic position, then in Philadelphia. Thus Bowditch was surprised to learn in 1889 of Osler moving to Baltimore. Bowditch wrote, “I don’t think this is quite fair of him for we wanted him in Boston.”<sup>1p298</sup> Bowditch had previously written that Osler “is one of the most popular men I ever knew.”<sup>1p309</sup> Two years later in May 1891, Bowditch was able to offer Osler the recently vacated Chair of Clinical Medicine at Harvard. But just then Osler had many things on his mind—organizing the medical service at the Hopkins Hospital, completing the manuscript of his textbook, and contemplating marriage to “the Widow Gross.” The last two were accomplished early the next year.

The second overture to Osler from Harvard came thirteen years later in 1904. President Eliot considered him an ideal candidate for an endowed professorship in hygiene.<sup>1p641</sup>

The position was intended to benefit mainly undergraduates in Cambridge but would have allowed some hospital and consulting work. It was not an attractive offer for Osler, who was dedicated to educating medical students. Also in 1904 Osler got wind of a more distinguished academic chair in

the offing and in June learned that he had been proposed to become the Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford.<sup>1pp642–43</sup> Cushing later concluded, “What [Osler] subsequently made out of his position in Oxford was just what Mr. Eliot felt was needed at Harvard.”<sup>1p641</sup>

In any case, it’s unlikely that Osler would ever have moved to Boston—and certainly not after his marriage. During a reception following Osler’s Ingersoll Lecture in 1904, President Eliot mentioned to the elderly Mrs. Susan Revere, Osler’s mother-in-law, that he seemed reluctant to live among his Boston relatives. Osler quickly interjected that it was Mrs. Osler (Grace) who objected.<sup>1pp641–1</sup>

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